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ABSTRACT

Contemporary Canadian families need a system of child care that is more appropriate to modern conditions than the present system is. Because many Canadian parents do not have extended families to turn to, they are increasingly paying for child care. More than half prefer a form of care other than the one they use. Canadian policy and programs should support parents who care for their children at home as well as parents who use out-of-home care. A wide range of options are needed, including in-home care, nonprofit center care, workplace care, for-profit center care, and community cooperative care. To provide access to programs and services evenly across the nation, the federal government should establish a special, time-limited grant for a variety of nonprofit child care demonstration projects throughout Canada. In addition, family-responsive working arrangements should be encouraged, as should family-focused employee assistance programs. Special attention must be given to ways of improving and strengthening the viability of in-home child care, and to the provision of a range of support services. Assessments of the costs of such a program of services should take into account benefits the system provides to families and society. (RH)

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PERSPECTIVES

THE VANIER INSTITUTE OF THE FAMILY / L'INSTITUT VANIER DE LA FAMILLE
120 Holland, Ottawa, Canada K1Y 0X6 (613) 722-4007

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CHILD CARE OPTIONS FOR CANADIAN FAMILIES

(Text of VIF presentation to the Federal Government's Special Committee on Child Care)

Ottawa, June 1986

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Introduction

In 1969, at a seminar organized and sponsored by the Vanier Institute of the Family, we stated that all families at some time or other, are likely to need help in caring for their children. Over twenty years later, there is a need to re-state once again that all parents require, on occasion, some other persons to supplement the care that they provide directly for their children.

The Vanier Institute therefore proposes a system of child care which has as its primary function the enhancement of the capacity of all parents to take on the many responsibilities of child rearing, both within their homes and outside.

In order to achieve such a system, it will be necessary to adopt a multi-faceted approach in developing a comprehensive child care policy for Canada. The Vanier Institute would support an approach which includes:

1. Family policies which enable parents to provide full-time child care to their young children if they so choose, and if they are able.
2. Workplace policies which enable employee parents to assume a greater proportion of their child care responsibilities, if they so choose.
3. A system of non-compulsory supplemental child care arrangements including in-home care, centre care, for-profit care, non-profit centres, workplace care and cooperative care, providing real choice to meet the needs of parents and children.

The Vanier Institute does not emphasize one objective over another but rather we would urge a comprehensive policy which would accomplish in these three ways the primary objective of providing parents with the support necessary to assume their responsibilities. Such a system of comprehensive child care would also be predicated on a recognition of the diversity of families in Canada, a diversity which should be supported through the broadest possible range of child care options appropriate to the needs of children and parents.

Current Realities

The context in which parents raise their children today has changed substantially from generations past but it is still the case that the care of children continues to be the primary responsibility of parents (usually the mother). The difference today is that the informal extended networks of support upon which parents traditionally relied are today less available. To quote Margaret Mead "... we now expect a family to achieve alone what no other society has ever expected an individual family to accomplish unaided. In effect, we call upon the individual family to do what a whole clan used to do." [1]

At the same time, the ways in which parents fulfill their responsibilities have changed. As a result, parents now have to turn increasingly to paid child care arrangements to enable them to fulfill work, study, or other obligations, or to provide temporary relief from the pressures of raising a family. Yet neither our perceptions and values, nor our policies and programs seem to have caught up with this change in the way that we, as parents and as a society, now care for our children.

For many parents, the need for supplemental child care forces them to make choices which do not serve the needs of their children, nor their own needs as parents. Information on the availability of resources is often inadequate and the resources themselves are often inappropriate and poorly distributed. For a large proportion of parents, more than half in fact, [2] the form of child care they currently use is, by default, different from the arrangement they would really prefer.

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[1] Day Care: A Resource for the Contemporary Family. Papers and proceedings of a seminar, Ottawa 1969. The Vanier Institute of the Family, October, 1971.

[2] Donna S. Lero, et al. Parents' Needs, Preferences and Concerns About Child Care: Case Studies on 336 Canadian Families, study prepared for the federal Task Force on Child Care, February 1985, p. 94. (Background Papers, Series 5, Status of Women Canada.)

A Mosaic of Child Care Options

The Vanier Institute of the Family recognizes that it is the primary responsibility of the family to provide and care for its children. At the same time, as Judge Rosalie Abella states, "The parents are still primary, the state indispensably auxiliary." [3] We would argue that Canadians, through the policies and programs of their governments and other institutions, must ensure that all parents are supported in their capacity to take responsibility for the care of their children, both within their homes and outside.

For those parents who choose and who are able to assume full-time care of their children at home, support could include enhanced family allowances, pensions for homemakers, access to community supports and services relating to child care, child tax credits and so on. Interestingly, when the current system of family allowances was introduced in 1944, it was meant to provide, in a modest fashion, some compensation for the heavier financial burden assumed by parents than by those who do not support children. As such, the Family Allowance Program has served as an acknowledgement that the industrial system of wages does not make adjustments for the financial responsibilities assumed by those wage-earners with dependent children.

Yet even with an enhanced system of supports to families, it remains the case that for many, and in fact today for the majority of families, the economic requirements as well as the personal aspirations of parents, do not make it possible for one parent to devote himself or herself to the care of their children on a full-time basis. Therefore, they must turn to some form of supplemental child care outside of their own.

To meet this very real need of Canadian families, Canadians need to ensure that a system of child care options takes its place as a necessary element within the range of policies and programs supportive of families. A complementary range of participants including governments, the private sector, communities and families will be needed to ensure the underpinning of such a system. The range of options necessary to meet the needs and circumstances of

[3] Report of the Commission on Equality in Employment, Judge Rosalie Silberman Abella, Commissioner, October 1984, p. 180.

parents would include in-home care, non-profit centre care, workplace care, for-profit centre care, and community cooperative care. Parental preferences are largely determined by the age and disposition of the child, the employment and logistical needs of the parents and the cost. Surveys have shown, for example, that many parents consider centre care unacceptable for infants but quite appropriate for pre-schoolers aged two to five. [4] A range of options rather than a more monolithic system composed almost exclusively of day care centres would therefore more appropriately meet the real needs of children and parents.

In order for this "mosaic" of child care options to become a reality for parents, we have stated that responsibility cannot rest with families alone or with governments alone. As the Vanier Institute argued in its response to the Quebec Government's green paper For Quebec Families, "public policies that support parents in the exercise of their responsibilities are of benefit to the society as a whole". [5] It is the long-term well-being of our society that is enhanced by such universally accessible programs as, for example, the medical system and the educational system. To this, we would add a child care system which is "family accessible". Since the benefits of such "social" programs are shared by society as a whole, the costs are to be assumed by society, at least in part, and cannot be assumed totally by the users alone.

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[4] Donna S. Lero, et al. Parents' Needs, Preferences, and Concerns About Child Care, p. 76.

[5] Submission of The Vanier Institute of the Family to the Standing Cabinet Committee on Social Development in Response to "For Quebec Families", V.I.F., 1985.

Sharing Responsibility

The child care system as it presently exists is uneven from region to region and between urban and rural locales, even though the federal government extends both direct and indirect support to Canadian families for the provision of child care. This support comes primarily through the Canadian Assistance Plan agreements with the provinces, a variety of transfer grants programs to families, and tax policies.

In order to address this problem of uneven access across the country, the Vanier Institute recommends that the federal government consider the establishment of a special time-limited child care grant which would be used to provide seed funding to a variety of non-profit demonstration projects throughout the country. Costs for such projects would initially be assumed by the federal government but would involve a graduated cost-sharing with the provinces, leading to full provincial responsibility within a limited period of time. As well, we would recommend that special small business grants and loans be made available to child care centres run for profit in order to support the much needed diversity of the overall system.

The present system of direct government subsidies to child care has, unfortunately, tended to reinforce a welfare attitude toward the recipients of such support. The need for supplemental child care is often thought of as being the result of the abdication of parental (and particularly maternal) responsibility. We would hope that any future government programs of direct funding to child care would be viewed not as a welfare program but rather as an essential social program contributing to the well-being not only of children and families but also to society as a whole.

In 1984, 69% of employed mothers of children under the age of three had full-time jobs.[6] The day-to-day reality of combining employment and child rearing makes it abundantly clear that the demands of the workplace are, in too many ways, incompatible with the employee's responsibilities as parent. Therefore, it is not enough to simply call for an improved system of child

[6] Monica Townson, The Costs and Benefits of a National Child Care System for Canada, prepared for the Canadian Day Care Advocacy Association, 1986, p. 1.

care without, at the same time, examining ways in which the working environment can be made more complementary and compatible with parental responsibilities. As the Vanier Institute stated in its response to the federal government on the issue of family allowance, "it is time to better support families and to make it easier for parents to assume their responsibilities as both employees and as parents".

In this light, the Vanier Institute would urge employers and employees, both in the public and private sectors, to support more family responsive working arrangements where possible, such as part-time, flex time, home working and job sharing. Government programs are needed which support both employers and employees in exercising real work style options by reducing the costs to both employer and employee that are too often associated with such work patterns. Only in this way can either or both parents realistically choose to spend a greater proportion of time caring for their own children, particularly during the early childhood years.

In the main, we have become accustomed to the benefits of work interruptions associated with special training courses, sabbaticals, sickness and disability leaves and secondments. While it is still the case that the small business sector in particular often finds these practices to be an excessive burden, the benefits of such programs, implemented where possible, extend beyond the employee to the employer and to society in general.

Similarly, the Vanier Institute would suggest that workplace practices which acknowledge the family responsibilities of employees represent not just a benefit to parents but an investment in the next generation of citizens, parents, producers and consumers.

For this reason, the Vanier Institute would encourage not only family responsive working arrangements, but would also encourage employers to share with their employees the cost of providing workplace child care as well as more family focussed employee assistance programs which would include some form of optional child care benefit.

In-Home Child Care

The vast majority of Canadian children are, by default or by choice, in in-home care situations, most of them unlicensed. For many parents, in-home care is their preferred arrangement but for others, there is no option.

The Special Committee on Child Care has heard much of the need for more child care centres. The Vanier Institute agrees that many parents would choose this option if more spaces were available. At the same time, however, it is unlikely that even a substantial increase in the number of child care centres would accommodate fully the child care needs for many parents. In-home care is still the preference over centre care for many parents and special attention needs to be given to ways of improving and strengthening the viability of this important option.

The issue of regulating standards in institutional centre care has been well addressed by a variety of briefs. There has been enough experience in applying and improving such standards that Canadians can be assured of a certain level of care and protection of both the children in institutional care and the caregivers themselves.

However, with such a large percentage of children in "informal" or in-home situations, it has proved to be far more difficult to address questions concerning the quality of care provided in these arrangements. In spite of existing licensing regulations, the vast majority of in-home child care arrangements continue to be unlicensed. In order to more effectively encourage in-home care providers to assure quality care for the children in their charge, the Vanier Institute would suggest that an appropriate objective at the present time would be to provide social and economic incentives to those who are offering what can almost be termed an "invisible" service to their community. Such incentives would include financial support to community resources such as community-based information and referral services, the establishment of educational opportunities pertinent to the needs of in-home care providers, toy exchanges, tax incentives to upgrade facilities, drop-in centres for "day parents" and the children in their care, community newsletters for child care providers, and so on. The objective of such

incentives would be to encourage in-home care providers to become more visible in the community, to become more accountable within the community and thereby voluntarily provide a higher quality of care for their children.

In-home care is not small scale institutional care. There is an intrinsic and qualitative difference between in-home care and centre care which needs to be supported in every possible way. The simple tranference of institutional standards and mechanisms of enforcement is not an appropriate response to the need for quality in-home care. Instead, these "family-like" child care arrangements require standards and mechanisms of enforcement that respect the unique characteristics of the family-like environment.

Governments, communities and families do have a responsibility to ensure that children in non-parental care situations are safeguarded in much the same way as children in parental care. Interestingly, in a survey conducted of parents asking what support governments could provide to help communities provide more and better child care, the two most popular responses were for funding community-based information and referral services and having a monitoring system to check on caregivers.[7] The Vanier Institute would add that such a referral service, which is essentially a service for parents, might also be responsible for providing support to the care providers as well. By providing sufficient incentives to in-home care providers, such that they would be encouraged to become more "visible" in their communities, the child care referral service might also share in the responsibility for ensuring that certain basic standards are met. By basic standards, we would suggest the same standards that are incumbent on any adult with responsibility for children, whether they be their own children or someone else's.

Community-based information and referral services can also play a leading role in educating parents with regard to the standards and quality of child care they might reasonably expect when looking for appropriate arrangements for their children. Ultimately it is the parents who must decide

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[7] Donna S. Lero, et al. Parents Needs, Preferences, and Concerns About Child Care, p. 95.

what standards are acceptable and appropriate to their children's needs and who must be responsible for ensuring that child care providers are encouraged to live up to those standards.

Whatever the type of child care arrangement, whether in-home or centre care, it is essential to establish a range of support services appropriate to each context within the child care community. These would include opportunities for professional development, networking opportunities, access to pertinent information, newsletters for child care providers, access to professional support for children with special needs, appropriate back-up in the care of sick children, toy and other resource exchanges, and so on.

Assessing the Costs or Appreciating the Value?

Throughout the debate concerning the enhancement of Canada's day care system, there have been numerous attempts to estimate the actual costs - to parents, governments, employers, communities and so on. In The Costs and Benefits of a National Child Care System for Canada, prepared in 1986, Monica Townson showed that depending on the ages of the children, the number of hours of child care, the type of child care, the child/staff ratios, the salary scale, and the number of children in care, the total cost of a publicly-funded child care system would be either $25 billion, $12 billion, $9 billion or $7 billion. The variation in the estimates also reflects, for example, calculations of the extent to which unemployment would decrease as a result of the increased need for child care workers but which might be offset by the increase in the number of parents who might then seek to enter the work force as a result of access to child care, or the extent to which additional employment would be created in constructions to build or renovate the required child care facilities, or the extent to which federal savings would result from increased tax revenues, elimination of federal subsidies to child care spaces, reduction of unemployment benefits, and so on and so on.

The Vanier Institute would suggest that equally important but even more difficult to calculate are the less quantifiable, less tangible benefits of a more comprehensive system of supplemental child care. To paraphrase Townson's conclusion, there needs to be a recognition that there are benefits as well as costs involved in providing supplemental child care and discussion should not ignore the benefit side of the equation.[8]

One only has to look at some of the many purposes and functions served by supplemental child care to realize the extent to which such a system benefits not only the parents and children but also, therefore, society as a whole. For example, providing appropriate care when parents are engaged in employment, providing care in order that women can be fully and equally integrated into economic life, providing care and support for children in families with special needs, providing care for children who are ill,

[8] Monica Townson, The Costs and Benefits of a National Child Care System for Canada, p. 4.

providing children with opportunities to participate in experiences designed to stimulate their development, allowing more free time to at-home parents to use that time for increased "home production", providing for children with special needs, assisting parents in achieving stable and continuous employment patterns and thus improving their prospects for adequate retirement income, providing child care as a supportive resource to families at a specific time of special need, providing child care when parents are engaged in volunteer, community or family tasks, enabling a single parent to assume a full-time job instead of turning to welfare, or allowing both parents to participate in the work force and thereby not fall below the poverty level.

The assessment of costs and benefits of a child care system is obviously important but before a realistic analysis can be undertaken, it is first necessary to establish what are the objectives of such a system and the value of those objectives. Only in this way can one establish what is in fact a cost and what can be justifiably called a benefit.

The Vanier Institute of the Family suggests that any consideration of the costs and benefits of enhancing our system of child care should begin with the questions 'Are we, as a society, willing to provide direct and tangible recognition and support to those adults in our society who are prepared to take on the primary responsibility for our children? Are we as Canadians, through the actions of our governments, corporations, institutions, churches and families, prepared to acknowledge that a publicly and privately supported mosaic of child care options which supplements the care provided by parents is a legitimate and necessary societal commitment to the well-being of all Canadian families?'

According to Dr. Edward Pryor, Director-General of the Census and Household Statistics Branch of Statistics Canada, the last decade "was one in which the family's economic viability depended on" two income earners.[9] As the Vanier Institute stated in its response to the Macdonald Commission's discussion paper Challenges and Choices, "when we recognize that the family's power to consume is a vital factor in the health of the national economy,

[9] Edward T. Pryor, "Canadian Husband-Wife Families: Labour Force Participation and Income Trends 1971-1981." The Labour Force, Statistics Canada, Ottawa, June 1984, Cat. no. 71-001, p. 105.

debates over the relative merits of day care and parental child care have become, to a large extent, academic. These issues are not distinct from nor secondary to the presumed priority of economic goals". [10] And again we stated in our submission to the Royal Commission on the Economic Union and Development Prospects for Canada "in contrast to the conventional one-sided precept that a strong economy is required to maintain a strong foundation of social relations and collective responsibility, it is equally true that the quality of familial and social relations is also central to the sound functioning of any economy".[11]

An appropriately flexible mosaic of child care options must take its place among a variety of other policies and programs supportive of families. Over the past twenty years, the Vanier Institute of the Family has developed a family-based perspective on public policy which serves as a yardstick to measure the successes and failures of a wide variety of public policy and program initiatives. In its various submissions to Royal Commissions as well as its formal briefs and presentations concerning family and child benefits, the Vanier Institute has supported:

- programs, policies and taxation provisions that acknowledge the care provided by family members to each other;
- a guaranteed annual income that accounts for differing family responsibilities of its recipients;
- a comprehensive review of the relationship between social expenditures and taxation systems, both personal and corporate;
- policy objectives which include both horizontal and vertical equity.

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10 Vanier Institute of the Family, Economic Development and the Revitalization of Families and Communities: Some Basic Principles, Submission to the Royal Commission on the Economic Union and Development Propects for Canada in response to "Challenges and Choices", VIF, Ottawa, July 1984, p. 25.

11 Vanier Institute of the Family, A Social Framework for Economics: Development from the Ground Up, Submission to the Royal Commission on the Economic Union and Development Prospects for Canada, VIF, Ottawa, October 1983, p. 44.

As Dr. J.W. Mohr stated, "we cannot on the one hand continue to speak in sanctimonious terms (about the family) and on the other hand ignore all the basic conditions families need to exist". [12]

One of the most pressing and basic needs of contemporary families is for a system of child care more appropriate than that which exists now. And it is only with the commitment and will of all of us, that we can achieve child care for our children both within the home and outside, which is flexible, accessible, appropriate, affordable, equitable and above all, child caring.

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[12] J.W. Mohr, "The Future of the Family, the Law and the State", Keynote address to The People's Law Conference: The Family and the Law, Ottawa, April 9 - 10, 1984, VIF Perspectives, Ottawa, 1984, p. 13.